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TAGS: PGOV PREL IR I2 RS

SUBJECT: RUSSIAN VIEWS ON ENGAGEMENT WITH IRAQ AND IRAN

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns for reasons 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Present and former Russian officials welcomed the message from the Senior Advisor to the Secretary and Coordinator for Iraq, Ambassador Satterfield, that the U.S. encouraged increased Russian engagement in Iraq during a round of April 2-3 meetings, and pressed the U.S. to broaden its dialogue with Iran. Officials assured Ambassador Satterfield that the GOR would not take advantage of U.S. difficulty in Iraq and hoped the U.S. could stabilize the country. The GOR continued to call for a timetable for withdrawing coalition troops, arguing this would further national reconciliation. Officials expressed pessimism over the potential engagement of Iraqi neighbors, predicting that Iran would continue to be most involved. Fearing the increasing influence of Iran in Iraq and throughout the Middle East, they stressed the need for engaging Iran rather than isolating and antagonizing it. Citing their own experiences with Tehran, the officials acknowledged the difficulty in dealing with the regime, but advised that failure to do so would only increase the chances that Tehran would go nuclear and continue to pursue its ambitions by destabilizing the region. End summary.

Russia Takes No Advantage of Situation in Iraq

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¶2. (C) Security Council Deputy Secretary Vladimir Nazarov was explicit that Russia would not "take advantage" of U.S. difficulties in Iraq, and wished the U.S. success in stabilizing the country. The GOR supported national reconciliation and believed that all Iraqi neighbors should facilitate this process, a message reinforced during the recent Baghdad visit of DFM Saltanov. Ambassador Satterfield expressed appreciation for Saltanov's visit as a welcome symbol of Russia's positive engagement with Iraq. Nazarov and Ambassador Satterfield agreed that Russia and the U.S. had mutual interests in Iraqi stability, which would prevent it becoming a base for international Jihadists and counter Iranian regional ambitions. Ambassador Satterfield told Nazarov the U.S. hoped Russia would urge Arab states to become more engaged in Iraq.

¶3. (C) Nazarov said that Russia's ability to help Iraq was limited, but the GOR would take what positive steps it could, such as its decision to write off Iraqi debt in February. Since then, there had been movement on Iraq possibly recognizing previous oil contracts with Lukoil, which the GOR saw as an important indication of Iraqi intentions and their future relationship. Nazarov hoped Iraqi security services would be more cooperative in providing the GOR with information on those suspected of murdering Russian diplomats. Ambassador Satterfield assured him the U.S. would look into ways to assist the GOR in this regard.

¶4. (C) Nazarov reiterated that the GOR believed setting a timetable for withdrawing coalition troops would further

Iraqi national reconciliation and stability, but recognized that any withdrawal had to be carried out in a responsible and realistic fashion. He said Russia placed great importance upon maintaining Iraqi unity and expressed concern over the long-term consequences of "violating" the country's ethnic and religious status quo.

Pessimism on Iraqi Neighbors' Engagement

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¶ 15. (C) Former Security Council Secretary Igor Ivanov offered a message similar to Nazarov regarding Russian interests in Iraqi stability. He gave a pessimistic assessment of the Iraqi neighbors' potential engagement, saying that Iran, unfortunately, would be the most engaged. Turkey continued to be constrained by the Kurdish issue, while the Arab states remained focused on the Middle East peace process (MEPP) rather than Iraq. Ambassador Satterfield agreed, and said that the Arab states remained "spectators" when it came to Iraq. Ivanov thought Russian oil companies could become more involved in Iraq, although he did not want to exaggerate the possibilities. He was surprised by Ambassador Satterfield's explanation that the Iraqi oil ministry wanted to maintain state control of the energy industry and sign only service agreements with international companies. Ivanov thought Lukoil was prepared to invest \$30 million in Iraq, but only through a production sharing agreement. Other companies would want the same, which bode poorly for Iraqi oil development. Ambassador Satterfield explained that the U.S. had made some progress getting the Iraqis to understand this fact, but it would help if other countries and foreign companies would send the same message.

Federalism Exacerbates Ethnic/Regional Tensions

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¶ 16. (C) Former PM Yevgeniy Primakov provided a pessimistic assessment of developments in Iraq, argued that stabilization had not yet occurred, and concluded that U.S. success in calming Sunni regions was only tactical. He argued that U.S. emphasis on federalism tended to exacerbate tensions over territorial control and domination of oil. Primakov listened skeptically to Ambassador Satterfield's explanation that aggressive demand for federalism had been tempered by willingness to compromise on maximalist goals and growing advocacy among Iraqi leaders of national interests, even among the Kurds. Ambassador Satterfield countered Primakov's suspicions that the U.S. sought permanent basing in Iraq in the wake of a December 2008 end to the UN Chapter 7 mandate. Primakov welcomed admissions by U.S. officials that mistakes had been made, but questioned whether the situation was salvageable "after so many."

Russians Call for Dialogue With Iran

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¶ 17. (C) Iran's increasing role in Iraq was an important topic for Ambassador Satterfield's interlocutors, who stressed the need for the U.S. to have a genuine dialogue with Tehran. Ivanov argued that Iran was truly interested in an active dialogue with the U.S.; dialogue with Russia and Europe, neither of which Iran perceived as a threat, were of lesser importance. He conveyed a familiar message that the GOR found Iran more reasonable, and even useful at times, such as when it helped prevent a civil war in Tajikistan. Ivanov did not exaggerate the possibilities of dialogue with Iran, and agreed with Ambassador Satterfield's assessment that Iran was different than North Korea, which had specific security and regime-survival goals that could be met through dialogue; Iran sought not simply security but recognition of its regional ambitions. Ivanov warned that Iran sought to take advantage of what it perceived as the U.S.'s weakened position vis-a-vis Iraq, Afghanistan, and the growth of anti-Americanism. Iran wanted to "push" the U.S. out of

those areas where Tehran wanted to increase its influence, including Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine. Ivanov counseled taking "small steps" to draw Iran away from its rogue status and into the international community.

¶8. (C) Ivanov drew on his long experience with Russia's "complicated" relationship with Iran to convey the difficulty in dealing with members of the regime, with whom he could negotiate for hours with no results. He observed that the Iranians appeared to live in the "last century" and once proposed that Russia and Iran form an alliance against the U.S. Russia tried, but failed, to explain that times had changed. Ivanov thought Russia and the U.S. should engage Iran in a "coordinated way" that could bring Iran "into the present." Failure to do so allowed an unstable situation to drag on, during which Iran would not "sit idle," but would further its nuclear ambitions. Ivanov conceded the difficulty in identifying a leader in the Iranian power structure, but settled upon Khamenei as having "real" authority.

U.S. Must Have Patience Dealing With Iran

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¶9. (C) Nazarov appreciated the difficulty the U.S. encountered in its limited dialogue with Iran on Iraq, but stressed that a broader dialogue was necessary as Iran's ultimate target was not Iraq but regional influence. Although American politics might not allow the U.S. to expand its dialogue, Nazarov thought the threat of an increased Iranian role in Iraq might. Nazarov argued against a narrow focus on Iraq or Iran's nuclear program, which stemmed from Iranian security concerns. A broader dialogue that took in Iran's regional interests, including Afghanistan, Lebanon and Palestine, would make Iran feel more secure and could dampen its nuclear aspirations. Nazarov added that Russian interests in these areas was more limited than the U.S., as was GOR ability to influence Tehran, yet Russia was the "only one" engaged with Iran. Nazarov advised patience in dealing with Iran, as time was necessary to overcome "layers of mutual mistrust." Ambassador Satterfield acknowledged the lack of trust and explained the current, limited dialogue with Iran on Iraq offered the potential to begin building trust, although Iranian negotiating behavior suggested otherwise.

Pressure on Iran is Counterproductive

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¶10. (C) Primakov assessed the Iranian regime as intent on developing the capacity to develop a nuclear weapon without

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actually acquiring one. Citing the diversity of opinion on the nuclear issue within the Iranian regime, Primakov argued for more extensive U.S. engagement and against pressure that only produced a more radicalized and united elite. Primakov thought the greatest challenge for the U.S. in the ME was the rise of Iranian regional ambition, adding that Iran saw a role for itself in the MEPP where it could use its "trump" cards, Hezbollah and Hamas. Primakov argued that the best defense against Iranian influence was a successful peace process, and added that Israeli fear of a nuclear Iran should be an incentive to move toward a comprehensive solution.

¶11. (U) Ambassador Satterfield has cleared this cable.  
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